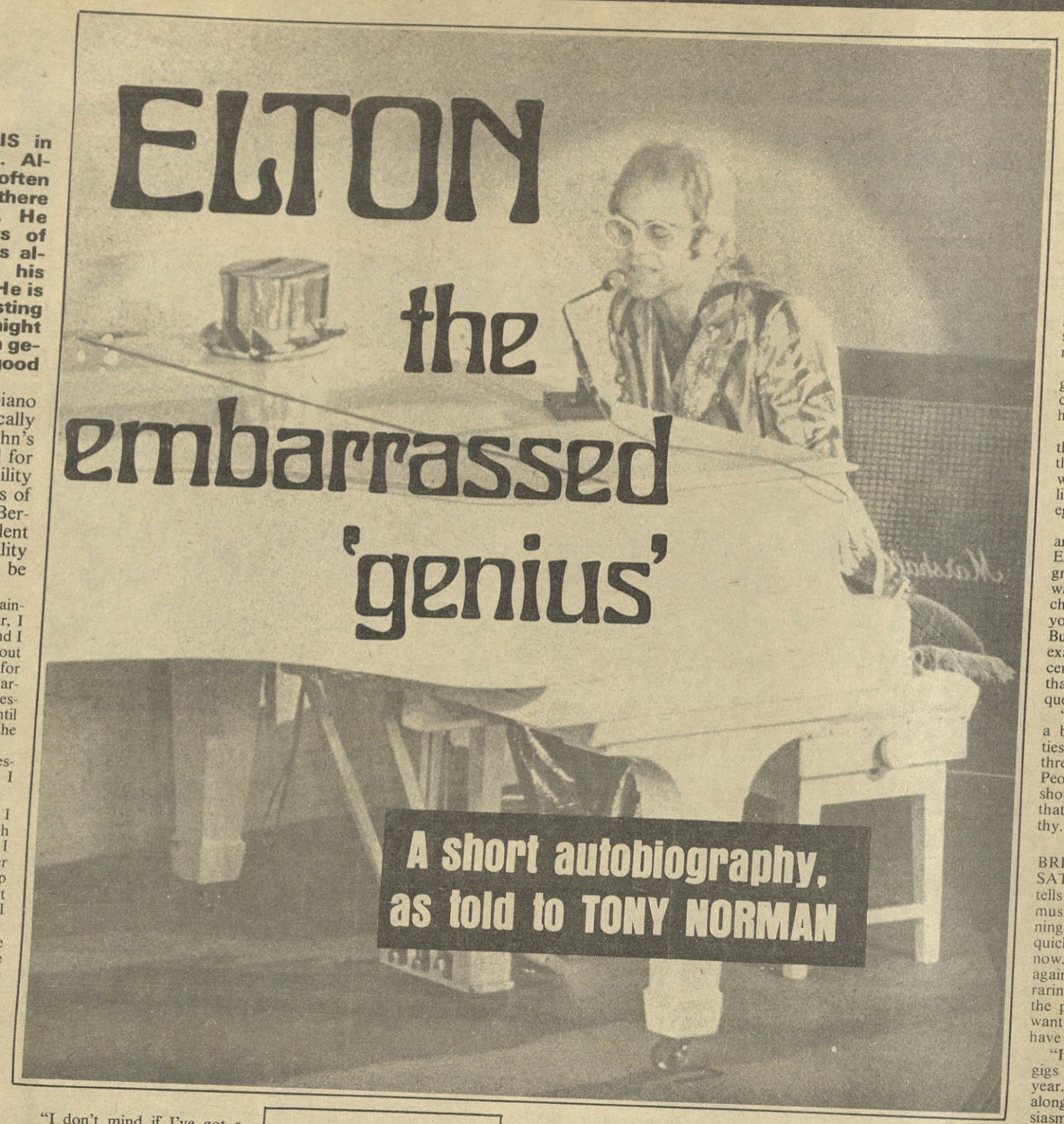
# ELTON the embarrassed 'genius'



## A short autobiography, as told to TONY NORMAN

**ELTON JOHN IS in reflective mood. Although the guy often plays the clown, there is another side. He suffers from fits of depression and is always aware of his weight problem. He is not the wild, jesting extrovert you might expect. But he is a genial host and a good talker.**

Although his piano playing is technically sound, Elton John's greatest gift is his feel for a song. He has the ability to wring the last drops of beauty or anger from Bernie Taupin's excellent lyrics. That's a quality born in you. It can't be taught in class.

"I didn't have a formal training. I started playing by ear, I just sat down at the piano and I could play. I started picking out tunes and went on like that for about three years, then my parents suggested I should take lessons and I stuck with them until I won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music.

"But I never enjoyed the lessons — it was a bore, and I didn't like practising.

"I WAS THE same at school. I was probably a good enough scholar to go to university, but I never tried more than 30 per cent. I was always into pop music or football and I just squeezed through my exams. I was very lazy.

"Anyway, I did persevere with the piano lessons for some time. I could have gone to the Academy full-time if I'd concentrated harder. But I didn't like classical music. I wanted to be a rock and roll singer and play in a band.

"So as far as education and learning the piano went, I never achieved what I could have done. But that was because I knew I wanted something else.

"When I was about seven or eight I wanted to play like Winnifred Atwell. When I was 14, I wanted to sing like Elvis."

But had he always had a big ambition to get into 'the glittering world of showbiz'?

"Always, at school, that was all I wanted to do. I knew that as long as I had something to do with the music business — even if it was only selling records in a shop — then I'd be happy. I was records mad. I loved singing and playing too, of course. I used to earn a few quid working in a pub. Then came the semi-pro groups and all that."

It's well known that he first won a name with that fine outfit, Bluesology. He took the big jump to the ranks of the full-timers with that band.

"The day I turned professionel was unbelievable. I remember being very frightened at giving up my job and knowing my parents were wondering if I'd be any good. It's a big decision to make when you're 17. But I'm glad I made it."

Going back to his childhood for a moment, was he the sort of kid who carried off all the prizes with neat little party pieces? Was the showbiz streak in him even then?

"I always liked playing the piano, but I hated being forced to play. I didn't like people pushing me into playing. My parents always used to do it. If I was at a wedding they'd say: 'Ah, come on. Give us a song.' I'd just curl up with embarrassment.

"And I never like it now. If I'm at a party and someone says: 'How about singing us something off your new album,' I get that same feeling. I just think it's an intrusion on my privacy. I'm out there to enjoy myself. I know people want to hear me sing, but they can always play my records. I'm out there to relax. I don't like being pushed and I've always suffered from that. I'm still very shy.

"I don't mind if I've got a few friends down at the house and we've had a few drinks. Then I'll start messing about and singing old Elvis songs or things like 'Da Doo Ron Ron'. But when it's one of my own, it's different. A sing-song is great but if I'm doing my own material, I feel like I'm on trial. Most people would think I was showing off anyway, so I just can't be bothered."

Yet the man who can be terrified by a small room full of people can go out on a concert stage and slog his heart out for a few thousand and enjoy every minute of it.

"Yes. That's a completely different thing. You enter it in a different frame of mind. The kids are there and they've paid to see you. You go on and that's *your audience*. They're loyal. They'll buy your records. They don't get the Freebies from the record companies. They're the ones who put you where you are and you're really keyed up to give them a good show. That's when I really enjoy myself.

"I'm still pretty mobile on stage. I suppose I've cut back on it a little, because we do a longer set now, but I still like to move about. I come off the stage dripping wet and think . . . that's really great."

So Elton now knows how to work to huge crowds. But the seeds of his performances were sown and watered back in the days of London's Cue Club and Cromwellian. He says the tough apprenticeship has helped him. But God, it was tough.

"They were very shaky days, really exhausting. We had no road managers to hump our gear around then. Like, I've done a gig in London at 4.30, gone up to Birmingham and done a 'double' and come back and played the Cue Club at 4.30 in the morning. I'll never know how I managed to lift my gear over those 600 sweaty people. Unbelievable!

"I look back now and think, how the hell did I do that? I mean, I've really got it easy now. But it was a good grounding. That's where you learn. When you look back on it, you're glad you did it. I've paid my dues, and I never want to do it again."

**Someone introduced me to Quincy Jones as a genius I was so embarrassed that I apologised**

DURING THE ROUGH early days things once got so bad at one stage, that he thought he'd made the wrong decision going pro. His career had stagnated.

"That was when I was with Baldry and we were playing working men's clubs. It was really depressing. I hated that Northern club scene, but I didn't see how I could get out. I didn't want to just join another band — I'd been on the road four years. So what could I do?

"I thought it might be best to give up the playing and concentrate on something else. Maybe try and get a job in a record company as a plugger or something. But then I saw an ad in the N.M.E. for Liberty Records. They were looking for songwriters."

They found Elton John and in turn introduced him to lyricist Bernie Taupin. If I wanted to be really corny, I'd say . . . the rest is history. But I won't. Incidentally, Elton failed a recording test at this time.

"They just said, sing five songs. I didn't know five. I hadn't sung for years. I ended up doing stuff like, 'I Love You Because'. Things I used to sing in a pub. They listened to me and said, sorry, no chance there. You can't blame them really. I was pretty terrible."

With a contract guaranteeing him the princely sum of £10-a-week in his hand, Elton left the group to concentrate on songwriting. It was the turning point of his career. "I had to get out. I was just so depressed. I used to sit on stage like a zombie. I hated it. I felt so suppressed, and I knew I could do better. I always knew I would be famous one day. I just had to get things moving."

So he was always sure he had the ability to make it big?

"Yes. I think I always knew I would be successful in music, whether it was singing, writing or working in a record shop. I knew I'd be successful one day. If you don't have that sort of confidence, you might as well give up. That's the only thing that keeps you going.

"Bernie and I had a lot of disappointments when we started out. We thought people were gonna cover one of our songs, then they'd change their minds at the last minute. That's the time when you need the encouragement most."

Now he has a certain amount of power, he is trying to help out his friend Long John Baldry. "All the time I was with John, he was such a great bloke. He treated me fantastically and he always treats his musicians well. I was always very happy with him. It's just that musically, I couldn't go on playing 'Let The Heartaches Begin' every night.

"He should never have done that. At the time it was great because he got a big hit. But it was the wrong record. It affected him and I know he realises it now. He should be in the position that John Mayall and Alexis Korner are in. He should have everybody's respect because he found so many people. But he's getting himself together now and I'm rooting for him."

TALK OF BALDRY takes us on to another mate, Rod Stewart who, says Elton: "Was around even longer than I was before he made it. I can remember asking him for his autograph while I was still at school. I saw him and John Baldry at the Conservative Coub, Kenton, when I was 17. Afterwards I went to the pub and went up to him and said: 'Excuse me Mr. Stewart. Can I have your autograph?' Wild! He used to come on stage with a scarf round his neck and sing 'Good MORNING Little School Girl.' I thought he was great.

"Then there were guys like Georgie Fame and Cliff Bennett and the Kinks and the Tremeloes. People who are still going. My favourite band were Procol Harum, who went out as The Paramounts. I used to stand there in the crowd taking it all in. I was a real fan.

"I really like bands who keep going, like the Kinks and Procol Harum. They've got the 'never say die' spirit. They'll always be there. They might fade into the background, like Cliff Bennett, but he'll be back because he'll keep on trying. For that same reason, I was really happy when the Fortunes got back in the charts.

"I admire people who keep plugging away because I don't think I could do it myself. I couldn't play 'Needles And Pins' for 10 years like the Searchers. I mean, I might be playing 'Your Song' in five or six years, but they still use all the same material. That would completely do me in. But they're still doing it. It's bands like that who give the music business some sense of permanence."

He didn't think the supergroup/supersplit period of a couple of years ago was a very healthy time.

"Let's take Blind Faith. I thought they were a better band than a lot of people said they were. But I don't think a band like that, with so many different egos in it, can possibly work.

"There's one ego in my band and that's me. I mean, it's not Elton John and his backing group by any means. I wouldn't want it to be like that; everyone chips in their ideas. I never say you must do this and play that. But everyone knows that, for example, if I say we won't do a certain song one night, then that's it. There's never any question.

"I know what it's like to be in a band with strong personalities. In Bluesology there were three or four really huge egos. People who thought they should be monster stars. And that climate was just unhealthy."

BRINGING THE CONVERSATION up to the present, he tells me he's happy about his music now. "I've stopped running around the world so quickly and I'm taking it easier now. I'm really enjoying playing again. Before every gig I'm just raring to go. And I had got to the point where I didn't really want to go on. I was raring to have days off.

"I was going to give up live gigs at the beginning of the year. But then something comes along which spurs your enthusiasm and you think, oh well, let's go on. I think it's the trouper in everybody. There would have been no point in quitting touring really. I would have had to own up that I was just sulking and being lazy.

"I do feel a sense of responsibility towards the guys in the band. They're great. When I'm down, they really bring me up. We're very close. That's why I want to go on gigging. I want my band to earn a lot of bread. I don't want them to have to join other bands and go slogging all over America for ten quid a night."

Finally, we talk about the way success has affected him and find ourselves returning to the days of the Cue Club. To know the man, you must know his roots.

"The success did take me by surprise, although I wouldn't say I was completely unready for it. Still, I think I dealt with it okay. A few things had to be straightened out first, though. Like when I first went over to the States, I was being introduced to people as a genius. I remember one incident at the Troubadour when I was actually introduced to *Quincy Jones* as a genius. I was so fucking embarrassed, I couldn't believe it. I apologised to him.

"I went mad at the guy who said it. I told him: never do that to me again. They do tend to go like that in America. But once I got my relationship sorted out with my P.R. bloke over there and told him to cool it, everything went very well. It was those four years that I humped my organ and amps down the Cue Club that came in handy then.

"If I'd been 17 I would probably have been unbearable when I got my slice of success. Close friends jokingly say I'm unbearable now. But really, I think I handled it as well as I could. But *I am* a different person, and I really do think it's impossible **not** *not change. It alters your whole life style. It really does.*

*"Personally, it just cuts you off."*